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ABSTRACT

In response to the public's demand for information, school boards are advised to develop a properly managed and executed public information and community relations program. Goals of such a public relations (PR) program are outlined as: honesty in the dissemination of information, an organization oriented toward community involvement, and procedures for feedback. The first of five chapters, "Internal Communications: PR Begins at Home," focuses on the school district staff and students as the most effective communications vehicle available to the school board communicator. Chapter 2, "Communicating with the Community," recommends visualizing the community in its components instead of as a nameless whole in order to communicate most effectively. Components include parents, senior citizens, business and industry, and opinion leaders. The third chapter, "The Media: Monsters or Marshmallows?" examines the relationship between administrator and reporter, and gives techniques and procedures to facilitate the relationship. Chapter 4, "Crisis Communications," emphasizes the need to create a master plan to handle crisis situations before they occur. The fifth chapter, "Bond and Budget Referanda," focuses on elements essential to a successful bond and budget campaign. Included are tipsheets on a variety of public relations topics, a public relations checklist, a school communications inventory, and six references. (WTH)

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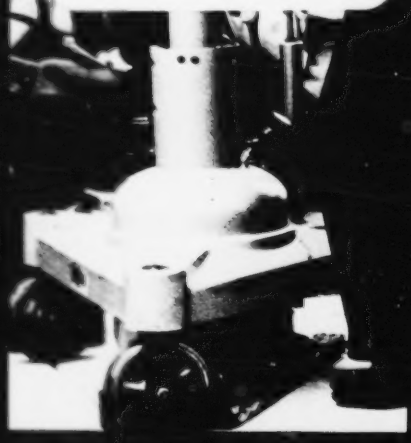

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SCHOOL BOARD LIBRARY SERIES · VOLUME 4

PRESS and community relations

BY
JEFFREY KANIGE
and
PEG RITTERBUSCH

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FOREWORD

Ten years after the first edition of Press and Community Relations was published, the job of school district communicator has changed dramatically. New technologies, new problems and new issues have forever changed the face of school public relations. This new, revised edition reflects those changes and I am pleased to present it as a valuable addition to the Library Series.

Few school leaders have to be convinced of the need for an effective press and community relations program. As the schools have taken on more and more responsibilities and as parents have grown to expect more, communications has been thrust into the forefront of district operations. Educators and school officials must communicate effectively with all their audiences. It's the only way to generate the high level of support necessary for superior education.

If the book is said to have one main point it is this: public relations happens every day. It is the district communicator's job to see that the messages being sent are as accurate and as positive as possible. The revised edition of Press and Community Relations should be an excellent resource for every board member who cares about the task.

NJSBA is grateful to the authors and to the entire Communications Department for their work on this important publication.

Octavius T. Reid, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The people and the policy. Without communication we would most likely still be drawing on rocks and cowering in the dark with little comprehension of each other. Communication, along with our thumbs, is what sets us apart from all other animal species. We have invented and refined language, the basic vehicle for communication, and sophisticated tools for transmitting and receiving the information encoded in our language. We've spent so much time practicing how to do it better that it must be important.

In fact, we have gotten very good at moving information from one place to another—we can now move more information faster and to more places than ever before. However, with all our biological and technical evolution, good communications practices still do not come easily and good communications programs are harder than ever to operate, especially for public school boards of education. As taxes and charges of educational misfeasance rise so does the public's clamoring for information. People want to know what's going on behind the ivied halls and through the tiled walls of the public schools. They want to know what their tax dollars are paying for. They want to know whether or not their children are going to be able to read when they finish their years in school. Reasonable questions all, and they should be answered. The public does indeed have a right to know what is happening in the public schools.

School boards can let the people find out for themselves, but that's a risky proposition that many times ends in frustration or the dissemination of misinformation. Or board members can provide as much information as possible with a properly managed and executed public information and community relations program. Such a program will ensure that the people

have an accurate picture of the board's activities and intentions and satisfies the community's voracious appetite for knowledge.

Okay, what should the goals of a communications program be? Every board member should have some ideas about what the program should accomplish, or help to accomplish. The underlying goal of every public relations program since the dawn of history as we know it has been to establish a favorable climate in which to operate. It's been stated and restated, written and rewritten and it still holds. But there is no static laundry list of components that must be plugged into a program for it to be successful. A program should do whatever the board wants it to do, but there are few things to keep in mind when drawing up the policy.

First, honesty is the best and most important policy. A good program will keep the community, media and staff well informed about what's happening in the district. The information should be presented truthfully, dispassionately, completely and continuously. Second, the program should be organized with an eye toward keeping community members involved and interested in the district. And right along with that, there should be procedures for feedback—the program should not be a one-sided affair. All these points will be amplified and detailed throughout this text.

Of course, before the first news release is issued, before the first newsletter rolls off the presses, the board will develop a coherent public relations policy. The policy should lay out the goals of the program, establish the mechanisms for achieving those goals, and a plan to measure how well the goals were met. On the next page you'll find a sample policy adopted by a New Jersey school district, that meets the above requirements.

The board will also benefit from a properly working communications program. By consistently providing answers to routine questions, boards will establish credibility, a reputation for being honest and completely above board (no pun intended). Credibility is an irreplaceable asset when the tough questions come along and in crisis situations. Many of those dreaded "public relations disasters" can be neatly avoided simply by spreading understanding, making sure everyone knows that what the board is saying is the truth.

As the reader will see, everyone in the district has a role in the communications program, including the entire board of education. But only one member of the board should be directly responsible for operating the program. That person is the voice of the board, the spokesperson. All questions—from the media, staff or community—should be directed to the board spokesperson. To get that all-important credibility, the board can only have one voice—a cacophony of conflicting ideas and opinions on any question or issue will destroy the trust that a communications program strives to build.

If the district employs a full or part-time public relations specialist the board spokesperson acts as a liaison with him or her. That line of communication will be vital. Staff communicators work closely with local media

NJSBA SCHOOL POLICY SERVICE
sample policy, bylaw, regulation, exhibit

FILE CODE:

COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

The Board of Education shall establish programs to keep effective two-way channels of communication open at all times between the school system and school district residents. The Board will continuously attempt to develop programs that reflect the public's wishes, and will do its best to keep citizens informed of school district affairs.

The Board will encourage the public to attend its meetings and will schedule time for questions and comments at the regular monthly meetings.

The Chief School Administrator in consultation with staff shall direct the publication of newsletters directed at the general community.

Date: April 10, 1984

Legal References:			
	N.J.S.A.	18A:17-20	Superintendent; General Powers and Duties
	N.J.A.C.	6:8-3.6(a)6	Instruction
	N.J.A.C.	6:8-4.6	School and Community Relations

Cross References:		
	1112.2	School news releases
	1120	Communication with the public/board of education meetings
	1230	School connected organizations/parent teacher association

1412s

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and all board employees so they must have up-to-date information and an intimate knowledge of what the board is doing or plans to do. Again, the district as a whole must speak with one voice.

The staff person assigned to carry out the program is naturally a key participant in the whole program. Obviously, the ideal person to do the job is a trained public relations professional, working full time on the communications program. But not all boards can afford to hire someone to devote all his or her energies to PR. The next best thing is to write responsibility for public information and community relations into the job description of a current district staff member. That person should preferably have some communications experience or at least be willing to get some training in how to operate a public relations program. And don't overlook the community. You may find a wealth of talented people just sitting out there waiting to be asked to volunteer their services. It can't hurt to try and in fact may add an unexpected extra kick to the overall program.

The board of education must also have an ear to listen. An ideal communications program emphasizes receiving as much as transmitting and good communicators not only get their message across but also listen closely to the response. A school board cannot expect its communications program to accomplish its goals simply by issuing a stream of press releases or an occasional newsletter. The program may need some major adjustments or fine tuning and the only way a board will know that is to listen to what its publics are saying.

Therein lie the basics of a sound communications program for a public school district—the policy and the people. Now the board needs a commitment to carry the program off successfully. Getting a message across takes a lot of thought and perseverance. Credibility, the most important public relations tool, is not magically bestowed upon worthy groups or individuals. Like they say in the TV commercial, "you earn it." That part is up to individual board members. What this book will show is how to best use the resources of the district to operate the communications programs, the nuts and bolts of public relations. The following pages also offer advice on how to build trust and understanding—the basic ingredients of credibility. But only a strong, determined commitment to communication will bring that coveted quality.

While the chapters of this book are divided into three separate areas, media, staff and community, a good communications program will speak to all sectors simultaneously. The purpose of the divisions is simply to show that the three groups do need some specialized attention. Nor should the reader infer that the board must do battle with each group or play one against another. A good public information and community relations program is not adversarial. Quite the contrary, the ideal program is generally a model of cooperation.

The three divisions basically give the PR planner a convenient way to lay out strategy. There are many angles from which to attack a problem and dividing the program into three main areas of concentration gives the PR strategist a clear view of the horizon. That can also give the planner a better idea of what exactly is causing the problem. Why does the com-

munity keep voting the budgets down? Is it because the editor or the local paper doesn't think that there is anything going on in the schools worth covering except the "sluggish" contract negotiations? Do the senior citizens feel that they don't get any benefits from the school? Or is staff morale so bad that the teachers or custodians who gather in the drug store on Sunday are saying uncomplimentary things about the board? In any event, the reaction should not be hostile. Instead the board and the PR strategist should look to clear up the misunderstanding calmly and rationally.

1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

PR Begins At Home

A fatal, albeit understandable, temptation that seems to grip many PR practitioners who start a communications program from scratch is to take a really global view of their task. They immediately begin spewing press releases detailing every triumphant act of the board of education. They dutifully pound out a newsletter, addressed to something called "The Community," chronicling every thought of the district superintendent and board president. Their loftiest goal is to produce a "Multi Media Show" to present at a monthly Lions meeting.

That sort of approach is understandable for two reasons. First, it's very visible, the communicator can show the press releases and the newsletter to the rest of the board. Second, it's easy to evaluate—simply count up the number of press clippings the board, superintendent and school district get. Now, that's all well and good, and as we'll see later those things are useful, to the point of being indispensable. But there is more to life than superintendent's messages and inverted pyramids.

While publications and releases seem like the most direct method of getting the message across (going straight to the people, etc.), they are actually more like an end run. By simply issuing statements on paper, communicators are bypassing their most valuable and probably most effective communications vehicle—the school district staff and students.

Many, if not most, of your staff members live in the community. They have family, friends, acquaintances all in town and they talk to those people constantly. A vital part of any communications program should be to ensure that the message those staff members are taking to the people is a positive one. A budget voter will put a lot of stock into what his neighbor, the teacher, has to say about "that school up there."

Some of that comes from management style and this text won't get into that, a book can't change something that personal. But your staff members are going to talk about you all the time. They are going to tell their friends, relatives and neighbors exactly what they think of the board of education. The job of the board's communicator is to see that the staff is working with informed opinions, not emotional reactions. You stand a better chance of coming off well if the people judging you know what you are doing and where you are coming from. You know you are doing

a good job, it's time everybody else knew it too.

So the first order of business is to make sure that all of your employees know exactly what goes on at every board meeting—not just teachers and administrators, but secretaries, clerks, custodians, bus drivers and even students too. A board doesn't want its employees to have to read about a major action affecting their jobs in the newspaper the day after the meeting.

The policy the board adopts on communication will stipulate who on the board will be responsible for seeing that someone on staff, either the full time PR person, the chief school administrator, assistant administrator or teacher, is in charge of keeping the staff up to date on board activities. The staff should know what's on the agenda for every board meeting, and items directly affecting them should be highlighted. Then, as soon as possible after each meeting (preferably the next day) the staff should be told exactly what happened.

At the very least this information should be in the form of a memo distributed to all staff. But that's the bare minimum and it really doesn't convey the kind of commitment to communication that today's board needs. There are better, more personal ways to get the information out.

An internal newsletter will do the trick. It doesn't have to be fancy, just a page or two issued once or twice a month with everything everyone needs to know about your board. It should not be written in the stiff bureaucratic jargon that marks those dreadful memos that litter peoples' in boxes. The style should be conversational with real sentences, not lists with dots in front of each entry. For example, two ways of conveying the same information:

AGENDA FOR THE NEXT BOARD MEETING

Resolution for Coach Spalding

Introduction of new staff member, Lincoln Middle School

Superintendent's report

Basic skills test results, Mr. Tester, principal, Brewster E.S.

Budget discussion

Comments

Adjournment

Sure, a half page memo would seem to serve the purpose. But it won't really interest anybody and may even turn people off because it simply doesn't say enough. It doesn't sound like the board is doing anything, there's no character. The information should have a voice. To whit:

> At its next meeting, the board will bid a fond farewell to an old friend and welcome a new teacher. As you all know, Coach Spalding is retiring this year after 35 years in the Athletic Department. The board will present the coach with a resolution recognizing his years of dedication and service to the district (not to mention his 355-78 record and five county championships).
>
> The board will also meet Mr. Donald Trump, who will be teaching social studies in Lincoln school. Don is originally from Marsland, likes to fish and his academic specialty is middle eastern cultures. Welcome aboard Don.
>
> Superintendent Duper will then fill the board in on how last Saturday's alcohol awareness program went. Many of you may have seen the picture in the Trib on Sunday. Mr. Duper will have all the numbers on attendance and give an overview of the reaction from the students. A student representative will be on hand to answer questions.
>
> Mr. Tester will formally present the final basic skills scores of the 3rd and 6th graders at Brewster School. Mr. Tester has already said that the scores were about the same as last year, which isn't bad but there is always room for improvement. We'll see just how much room at the meeting.
>
> The board will also consider some budget items. This meeting will focus on Memorial High School and their requests for next year. The Biology and Physics Departments are proposing some new programs and Mrs. Zygote from Bio and Mr. Newton from Physics will explain what they have in mind. Also, the Athletic department would like to expand their year-end awards ceremony and Coach Rawlings will explain his plans. Hope to see you all there.

The difference is pretty obvious. The first was just a list, written by nobody special to no one in particular. The second was written by people, for people and about people. It really doesn't take that much longer, just a little more care and thought.

Board of education members are not nameless, faceless and voiceless automatons who periodically print out their activities. People don't talk in lists and sentence fragments. You don't use dots and dashes when you speak. If you don't talk like that, why write like that? Board members have emotions, let them come through. Put some feeling into your writing, don't be afraid to let your staff see that you are people, It can only help in the long run.

The same goes for the post-meeting rundown. Don't just type out a

list of items that were approved and disapproved. Put down what happened. If your best friend asked you what happened at the last board meeting, you would describe the action in reasonable detail. Do the same thing for you staff. The board will come across as more open if you give out more than just "approved this" and "disapproved that."

And you don't have to include every little fund transfer and parliamentary motion. Don't just give the staff the meeting minutes, they can get that if they really want it. Boards should pretty much know what the staff is interested in. Personnel appointments, major budget actions, special programs for or by the students and teachers, these are the kinds of things that your employees and pupils are interested in. That kind of mutual understanding can bring the whole district together.

It will be especially helpful when the board has bad or unpopular news to report, such as denying tenure to a popular teacher. That information should not be sugarcoated in any way and it should never be covered up

or glossed over. Play it straight, but play it like human beings. Trying to hide it or suppress its importance will only distance you from the rest of the school community. And that will only make it worse and more difficult for you in the future.

The newsletter can be just a one page typewritten sheet. It's better if it's not, but there may not be enough time or money to do anything

more elaborate. But whatever you do, don't set it up in a standard memorandum format, it's too stiff and too formal. You want to communicate, not intimidate.

What's more, you want your information to stand out from everything else in the staff mailboxes. You want it to be something that people will look for, not just another dull memo. Try to come up with a catchy headline to splash across the top of the page. Don't just use one or two words like "Board Agenda" or "Board Actions." In the example given before, a good headline might be *"Coach Spalding Scores Big With School Board."* Even a simple *"Board Honors Coach Spalding"* would be better than "Board Agenda." In other words, try to pick out the most interesting or important item in the text and give it a big play. It will catch your readers' attention and hold them for the rest of the information.

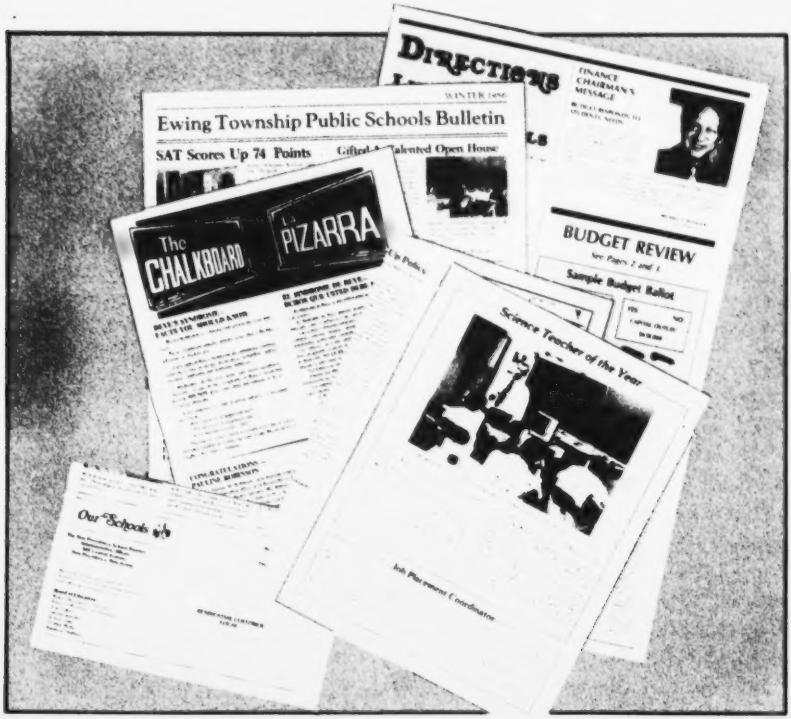
As you go along, you can break up the copy with subheads, which will make the whole thing more readable. Properly placed empty space tends to make text more accessible. Use the natural breaks in the copy, where ideas change. Going back to the previous example, possible subheads would be, "High School Hosts Alcohol Awareness Day," "Basic Skills Scores Hold Steady," and "Physics, Bio, Phys. Ed. Plan for Next Year." The subheads should stand out from the rest of the copy but not compete with the main headline. On a typewriter, simply underscore the main head as printed herein. With more sophisticated equipment, such as what you might find in a school or private print shop, you can do more elaborate things.

If you're still not sure what you can do, ask one of the art or English teachers for help. Community newsletters can be more sophisticated because of their flexible timelines and more detail will be given in later chapters. Right now, you are looking to get the information to the staff in a timely and interesting fashion.

Now, the board shouldn't assume that the job of communicating is finished just because the newsletter went out. There has to be some mechanism for feedback. The audience should be able to let the board know how it feels. The pre-meeting newsletter should invite responses either by mail or by asking interested people to show up at the meeting. The post-meeting newsletter should also ask how people feel and invite them to respond either by phone, or if you're a little squeamish about that, by mail. Knowing what people are thinking "out there" will make your decisions easier and more palatable to those affected.

There is another way to get the news out—have regular meetings with the staff before and after board meetings. The board communicator doesn't have to do this, though that would be ideal. The administrator or staff communicator could discuss the agenda beforehand and then fill staff in after the board has met.

This approach has the advantage of being more personal than even the most conversational newsletter. The communicator can get together with



small groups of staff members, at their convenience, and go over what the board is up to. There is room for give and take as long as the person presiding knows enough about the board's activities to answer questions. Again, that line of communication is vital, it cannot be overstated. The groups should also be small enough to allow for exchanges of ideas. Large general staff meetings are as impersonal as the block memoranda. Local union meetings are also the wrong forum, you don't want to mix your message with anything else, distractions will just dilute what you want to say.

The disadvantage in holding small group "quality circles" is time, and it's a big negative. If communicators don't have the time to get to everyone in the district personally, they shouldn't try. Rushing through a meeting and cutting off questions and discussion will only backfire in the long run.

However, no matter what the real or perceived time constraints, the board should be prepared to meet with the staff whenever something big or controversial is happening. An example would be the popular teacher mentioned above as being denied tenure. The board must be willing to answer questions about its actions when there is deep or widespread feelings about an issue. There is no good reason for trying to appear aloof and above it all. You've got to get down in there and explain yourself, for your own good. The board certainly does not want the entire staff

suspicious of all its actions and motives. But that is exactly what will happen if you don't develop a reputation for being honest and open. The only way to get the reputation is to BE honest and open, take the heat and come clean.

No doubt it will be painful at first, nobody likes to face a hostile audience. But it will be more painful and the hostility will become entrenched if your own people don't trust you. If people know that they can believe you they will take you at your word and that will be good enough to quell the bad feelings.

For many districts, then, the best approach is probably a combination of a well-written newsletter and personal briefings with the staff. Neither should be confrontational or distant. Both should encourage feedback and both should happen on schedule as needed. (See tipsheet titled *Making the Entire School Family PR Practitioners*, p. 9)

Don't Forget Students

Students probably represent the most important communications link in a district. It's amazing just how many people in the community form their judgments of a school system by comments made by students, who talk to parents about teachers, administrators and homework. Students also offer opinions to friends on what is fair and unfair and they will often discuss with relatives how they've been treated by various members of the school staff. So unless students have been influenced otherwise, there are a lot of people out there who receive some pretty negative information about schools.

One of the main reasons for negative feedback is that all too often the relationship between school and student is coldly impersonal. Consider the way that most students receive information—from an anonymous voice droning announcements in homeroom over the school intercom system or from a school official standing behind a podium at a general assembly of the entire student body. In addition, many students have been given ID numbers,

locker numbers and computerized report cards. Not a very personal way to communicate, is it?

While these techniques may be necessary in large school districts to maintain accurate records, they strip away the students' individuality and reduce them to a common denominator. To make sure that students become a positive part of your district's overall communications program, here are some tips:

- Show all students that they are important and that the district really cares about them. Contacts with staff, including teachers, guidance counselors, librarians, school nurses, secretaries and custodial staff should be friendly, pleasant and helpful. A school secretary who acts like a school principal, who does not welcome students in the office or who makes them wait is certainly not an asset to an internal community relations program. Neither is the custodian who uses abusive language or continually shouts at students. Needless to say, the authority of all school personnel should be clearly defined and procedures for reporting students who violate regulations should be outlined.
- Administrators who want to know what's on the students' minds have set up advisory committees. Membership on the committee is open to all students regardless of grades or discipline problems (That way you get to know what all of them are thinking—not just those that are considered the "good" students).
- Surveys provide another way of obtaining student feedback. Pupils are asked their opinions of classroom and extra-curricular activities, changes in procedures and policy, counseling, rules and regulations, teacher attitudes, grading systems and report cards, among other topics. After the results of the survey are tabulated, make sure that the information is shared with the students. Tell them what action, if any, will be taken and be sure to thank them for their responses. If you plan to take no action, explain why—kids can be reasoned with. Remember, if the survey information is not shared, the administration's credibility can go right down the tubes.

While the above represent the more popular methods of establishing two way communication between the school and students, there are many other methods. Do what you think is best for your district. Some districts have used suggestion boxes, ombudsmen and student town meetings or assemblies. But no matter what techniques your district chooses, make sure your commitment to involving students in your PR program is real. Kids can spot a phony a mile away!

MAKING THE ENTIRE SCHOOL FAMILY PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

By
Roseann E. Brown
Public Information Officer
Camden City Schools

We're All Public Relations Practitioners To The Public

School district employees know their jobs and do them well. What they don't know is that, in the eyes of the community, school family members are public relations practitioners in their own rights. When school employees are unpleasant on the telephone, discourteous during face-to-face meetings with the community or generally negative in their dealings with the public, the total image of the school district suffers.

Recognizing Our Role—We're All In This Together

Because each school family member represents the school district, it's important to help staff members recognize their public relations role. Try to:

Conduct inservice programs for all staff—from the custodians to the central administration (don't forget board members). Give tips on "good PR" practices that staff members can use when working with the public.

Develop an in-house system to squelch rumors so that back fence conversations between school family members and their neighbors "keep the story straight" about events and activities in the school district.

Give school family members a "PR Treasure Chest" that outlines important general information about the district and provides staff with a means of keeping the district's PR person abreast of district events and activities.

It's What's Inside That Counts

The typical PR Treasure Chest should contain:

- a table of contents
- a message from the superintendent
- a description of what the school board is, the number of members and terms of office, the board meeting dates and locations for the current school year.
- a directory of all schools in the district—include offices if your district is small
- the types and numbers of employees in the district—include all staff
- the latest student enrollment figures
- a description of the district's public relations office and the services it provides to the media, staff and the community

continued

- a list of media contacts in your community with mailing addresses and phone numbers
- a short tip sheet called "Ten Principles of Clear Writing" or something similar
- a tip sheet on how to prepare a good news release
- a sample news release
- samples of a news coverage request form and a photo coverage request form for use by the district public relations office. These are to be completed by school family members and sent to the district's public relations office for follow-up.

Good PR For Schools is a Comprehensive Effort

The PR Treasure Chest is a helpful tool for school family members. Even so, it's only part of the picture. As mentioned, staff members need to understand their PR role and use every means available to tell the school district's story whenever possible. It's a comprehensive effort!

COMMUNICATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

2

The easy way to start communicating with the community is to think of it as just that: THE community. Sure, it's simple—it's just one big thing out there, waiting to hear what the board has to say. So a newsletter mailed to THE community will inform everyone and activities for THE communi-community will get everyone involved. It's neat and eminently practical.

Unfortunately, there is more to the community than that. In fact, treating at it as one large entity makes it harder to properly relate to it. A much easier way and one that will provide for a more thorough job of communication is to break THE community down into its component parts. We present here only a suggested list, this kind of information is best gained from experience. There are, of course, some components that are universal. Still, what follows is simply the lines along which such a list can be drawn.

Parents

This category is one of those universals—every school district known to mankind has parents of schoolchildren living in it. Parents probably make up the board's most receptive audience simply because they "think school" nearly every day. They send their children to school in the morning, they plan their day around when the kids get home from school in the afternoon. Even parents who don't get exceptionally involved in school probably at least know where the building is and what it looks like.

Within the whole there is usually a wide ranging degree of interest in the school. There are those parents who are intimately involved in the school—they belong to the PTA, they volunteer as aides, they come to every board meeting and serve on ad hoc committees. Then there are the parents who simply don't care about the school and don't want to—it's just a place

where their kids go every day and that's fine. Communicators will find this range in every community group and should react to it the same way: gear the program to the middle. At one extreme you're preaching to the converted—at the other your sermons are falling on deaf ears.

This is not to say that the extremes should be ignored. The parents who do get heavily involved in the schools should be encouraged and recognized—they are invaluable and can serve as the core of your community relations effort. Give these people important things to do and consult them whenever possible. Institute a "Citizen of the Year" award, make them the chairpersons of citizen committees. In short, let them know you appreciate their concern and their efforts. But, you see, the object of your community relations program is to get people involved and these pillars of the community are already involved. (See tipsheet titled *Where and How to Recruit School Volunteers*, p. 16)

Conversely, people who don't want anything to do with the school will never become involved, no matter what you do. But there is a vast middle ground occupied by people who would get involved if they had a good reason. An obvious good reason is that their children are being educated in the school. However, many parents quite naturally become involved only with their own children and go no further. Helping children with their homework and maybe attending band concerts is admirable but you need more. These are the people who need a good reason to vote yes at budget time and to continue to support the school when their children graduate. And the cries echo in the hills— "How? How do we get people involved?"

Well, it's not easy. Basically parents want to know what's in the school for them, besides a wonderful education for their children, they expect that. What else have you got to offer? You may not have to start anything new. One of the most popular programs a district can offer is community education. If a district runs a community education program parents will flock to it. Aerobic exercise classes, cooking classes, arts classes, scuba classes, tennis lessons all fill up quickly with people who used to think the school was just for their kids. Many times, district teachers conduct the classes and are a great advertisement for the school. (See tipsheet titled *Public Relations for School-Age Child Care Programs*, p. 17)

Cable television can offer another outlet for community education, one that doesn't even require people to leave their living rooms. A school district in southern New Jersey, for example, runs a marvelous cooking show hosted by one of the district's home economics teachers. The show is as informative as "The Galloping Gourmet" and is another fantastic statement that the school district cares. The same district produces a lively student-hosted news and public affairs show that offers a wealth of information about the town. It's a positive answer to the common "we don't get proper coverage" complaint that boards frequently level at local news media. With the public access requirements placed on local cable operators, television is within the reach of even the smallest districts. Boards should contact their local cable company for more information about how to get

on the air.

But back to in-school activities. Your district's students can also provide services for community members. Promote band concerts and choral recitals as cultural events—bring more than just the parents of the players in. Many people like music, appeal to them. The same goes for the drama club productions and any other kind of student performance. For many towns, the school can be a cultural center—open it up.

You can do the same with athletic facilities for the people who go for sports rather than the arts. The gym, swimming pool, tennis courts, baseball diamond, and the track are all resources that people will use if you encourage them. These same resources also answer the "what-do-I-get-from-the-school" question. Sure, security may be a problem and if so, limit the use to outdoor facilities or provide security. Nobody said it was going to be cheap but taxpayers may be more willing to pay for something tangible like a Saturday afternoon tennis match.

Senior Citizens

Seniors present much the same problems as marginally involved parents—they want to know what's in the school for them. Many school districts have come up with ingenious ways to interest senior citizens in the schools. Districts have offered dinners, dances, and half-price tickets to sporting events and concerts all in an effort to reach out to senior citizens. Some districts bring seniors into their classrooms as special teachers to give students a first-hand perspective on history and society. (See tipsheet titled *Intergenerational Program: Bringing Generations Together*, p. 19)

There are quite a few things districts can do, it really all depends on what the seniors want. The best way to find out is to ask. Obviously, if there is a senior citizens group in town, they can represent the seniors. The board should try to establish a working relationship with that organization, possibly by appointing a liaison who can work with the board and the group. If there is no active senior citizens group, form one. Talk to the people who show up for the concerts, games or dinners. Ask them what they'd like to see or what they'd most want to do with the school.

In any case, the program should be continuous and that goes for the entire community relations program. One spaghetti dinner a year won't do it. You've got to show that you really care about people and that you're willing to work for all of them. (See tipsheet titled *Gray Doesn't Have to Mean Anti*, p. 20)

A word here about newsletters. Have one but don't rely on it to carry your message to everyone. Use it to promote the band concert or the community education program but use a little imagination. Don't just post a notice on page two that says "Band Concert on January 27, Come one, Come all." Do an interview with the band director or better yet, with the lead tuba player or the featured soloist. Include a regular column devoted

to senior citizens, preferably written by a senior for seniors. As long as you're going to have a newsletter you might as well make it interesting. If you've got all these wonderful programs going the newsletter is one way to let everyone know about them. An interesting newsletter is one that everyone will read, so you'll know that people hear what you are saying. It takes a little more time and a certain degree of patience, but it is well worth the effort.

Business and Industry

Richard Lesher, the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, once told a gathering of school board members that businesses are willing to help school districts, all they have to do is ask. The business community can be a fountain of valuable help for school districts if the district makes the first move. Business people realize the value of a good school system—well educated students make better employees—and thus have a vested interest in the performance of the local school district.

The best way to approach the business community, obviously, is through the local chamber of commerce. Again, the school has something to offer business leaders—present and future employees and consumers. And maybe some other services, such as computer time and advertising space in yearbooks and the like. It starts to get repetitious, but, the relationship should be a lasting one. Don't just go the the chamber when you need new uniforms for the basketball team. Stay in touch and work together. There will be some give and take but that's to be expected—you can't expect to take and not give a little.

Opinion Leaders

Quite possibly the most important people in any community are those that everyone else looks to for leadership. The board of education may indeed be among that group but chances are other people and groups wield a considerable amount of influence. Opinion leaders set the agenda for community discussion and actions. They can be found in many different places, including within the groups already discussed. If these folks support the schools, more than likely the rest of the community will too.

The first place to look for opinion leaders is in the halls of the municipal government. The borough mayor, chairman of the township committee, or the city council representatives were all elected (usually) because they caught the fancy of a plurality of people in the burg. Relationships with municipal governing bodies can be strained at times because of fiscal differences, it is best to try to maintain a modicum of civility at all times. Hopefully, a more understanding and productive relationship can be forged.

Opinion leaders can also turn up in less obvious places. Fraternal organizations such as the Lion's or Kiwanis clubs are good examples. Women's clubs and other civic organizations also serve as gathering places

for the movers and shakers of the community. Find out who goes to the meetings and go yourself. Get to know them on an informal basis. Talk about common problems, the weather, sports, anything really. You are looking for an easy relationship, a friendly one with the people that other people listen to. After some time, people will listen to you more closely too.

Newsletters and Such

Clearly, personal relationships are the most important aspects of a community relations program. Being on good terms with all groups in the community, bringing people into the school and bringing the school to the people is the best way to engender popular support. But in between the contacts, your audiences want to be informed, kept up to date about what is happening. We've already touched on a couple of ways to do that, namely newsletters and cable television. (See tipsheet titled *Discover Teaneck: A Cooperative Effort to Promote Community and the Public Schools*, p. 21)

WHERE AND HOW TO RECRUIT SCHOOL VOLUNTEERS

By
Richard J. Pokrass
Director of Public Information and Alumni Affairs
Burlington County Community College

Before asking for volunteers, be certain that you have specific activities in which the volunteers can become involved.

Make the volunteers feel important. If they serve on advisory committees, try to make use of their advice. If they serve in *any* volunteer capacity, treat them with the same respect as you would a paid employee.

Give recognition to the volunteers. Some inexpensive means of recognizing volunteer efforts include news releases, newsletter articles, certificates of appreciation, free tickets to school sponsored events, special parking privileges and other types of incentives or rewards.

Become familiar with some sources of volunteers and the means of reaching them:

- General mailings to your constituency
- Newspaper and newsletter articles
- Television and radio public service announcements
- Talk shows
- Word of mouth
- Flyers distributed to students for presentation to their parents.
- Contacts with colleges and universities for student internships or service projects in which college students would assist your schools.
- Contacts with service clubs, churches, synagogues and other non-profit organizations that may be willing to assist their local schools on a volunteer basis.
- Contact local businesses and industries concerning release time for executives and other employees who may want to assist the schools.

Develop a screening process that will help determine whether the prospective volunteers you obtain are actually qualified to assist you are and capable of performing their duties.

Organize a training and orientation program for new volunteers and an ongoing motivational program for all volunteers, both new and old.

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

By
Geri Egizi Borbe
Public Information Officer
Voorhees Public Schools

Purpose

- To recruit students and gain community support.

Major Audiences

- Working parents of school-age children.
- Community in general.
- Media.

Determining the Need

- Send home questionnaires with all children in district schools.
- Leave questionnaires at busy spots (shopping centers, hair dressers, etc.)
- Issue press releases soliciting a response from those interested.

Communications Channels

- Flyers from school.
- The press—daily and weekly. Local weeklies are often the best bet although large dailies respond occasionally.
- Radio and TV—small local stations are often hungry for news but larger stations want only exceptionally newsworthy or unusual items.

Dealing With the Media

- Call all stations and papers. Introduce yourself and ask who should receive your press releases. Learn their deadlines. Ask what kind of material they want—straight news or feature.
- Take black and white photographs and send them accompanied by an interesting caption to local weekly press. They're perfect for fillers and copy- breakers and most local weekly papers can't afford a full time photographer. No need to send a press release with these. Use Tri-X 400 ASA black and white film. Local papers welcome photos of kids since kids' parents buy newspapers.

Writing Press Releases

- Design an attractive letterhead that gives the name of your

continued

organization, its address, the name of a contact person and his/her work and home telephone number. Label the letterhead as a PRESS RELEASE or NEWS RELEASE. Inexpensive rub-off letters can be found at most stationery shops.

- Type the date you want the information released at the top of the page.
- Try to keep the release to one page, but if it does run longer, type "more" at the bottom of the first page. Type ## to signify the end of the story (this adds a professional touch).
- Make the first paragraph interesting and informative to get the editor's attention.
- Follow the KISS rule—Keep It Simple and Short.

INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM: BRINGING THE GENERATIONS TOGETHER

By
John Garrabrant, Frank Monaco, Patricia Hanlon and Ruth Long
Toms River Public Schools

There is probably no more divisive element in our communities than that of the generation gap. How often have you heard: *"These darn kids just aren't any good any more. They cut across my lawn with their bikes. They talk back to me."*

The actions of a few brand all kids this way. Looking at the stiuation from the opposite side of the fence, maybe you've also overheard students complaining: *"These senior citizens think the whole world owes them something. They drive too slow. They're always so crabby."*

Again, the actions of a few brand all senior citizens this way.

The key to solving this problem is communication, developing a sense of community. Using the schools as meeting places we can teach both young and old that we still need each other, that we still live in an interdependent society and that our individuality can be enhanced by learning about one another.

Toms River Regional has several successful programs you may want to explore:

Invite senior citizens free of charge or at discount rates to school plays, concerts and other activities that the general public attends. Our students have enjoyed the accolades of the seniors after performances and our senior citizens realize where some of their tax dollars are going, namely, to train talented individuals.

Invite senior citizens to any activities going on during the regular school day. The senior citizens will be able to see "their" schools in operation and have the opportunity to meet "their" teachers.

Invite senior citizen representatives of older adult communities, organizations, housing developments to go to school for a day. Plan a day, assign a student to each visitor and let them go to several classes with the student. There is no better way to get both generations to exchange ideas and information and to see what is happening in our schools every day.

Donate a school bus that has reached its ten year limit under state law to any needy adult community, organization or group. (By law there would have to be a monetary exchange of at least $1.) But you will be providing your senior citizens with comething they really need—transportation!

Visit adult groups and communities in their surroundings and allow a small amount of time for students and seniors to mingle.

GRAY DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN "ANTI"

By
Lynne Stoddard
Community Relations Consultant
Mountainside School District

How to Enlist Senior Citizen Support For Your Schools

Make a time commitment. Appoint a continuing liaison and invest the time in personal contact.

Set up a year-round plan. Avoid providing a sudden surge of school information at budget time.

Begin by working with the established senior citizen organization(s) in your town. Get to know them and let those contacts lead you to others.

Get senior citizens into your school buildings, either as volunteers or invited guests. Issue courtesy cards allowing free or reduced admission to school events; hold a Senior Citizen Tea or Grandparents Day.

Recognize that this public is made up of many subsets. Gear your information flow accordingly; one method of communication won't reach all the segments.

Tend to your general public relations. Keeping parents, staff, and the general community well-informed will have positive impact on this group.

Involve students. Encourage student projects that may benefit senior citizens.

Forget "gray" as a stereotype. Gray hair and canes are no longer identifying badges. Different life circumstances mean different perceptions of the priority of education.

Share your assets. Empty classroom space due to declining enrollment, the school lunch program and reduced costs for continuing education courses can benefit seniors without adding substantially to the school budget.

Invite them to share their resources. Look creatively at their areas of expertise and larger blocks of free time.

Sidestep any basic blocks to communication. These might include poor hearing, reduced vision and shorter attention span. For example, always use large, easy to read type.

DON'T

...Ignore senior citizens or figure they don't count.

...Assume the typical senior is uninformed, uninterested or anti-education.

...Forget that the senior citizen profile is a constantly changing one.

DO

...Enjoy getting to know these special people!

DISCOVER TEANECK: A COOPERATIVE EFFORT TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By
Jeanie Cole and Rori Kanter
Teaneck Housing Information Center
and
Judy Distler
Teaneck Public Schools

Recognize that the promotion of a diverse community is interrelated to the promotion of that community's public schools.

Introduce schools and community to prospective residents and reinforce spirit and pride of residents with a community event.

Plan something that will be a cooperative venture. The fifth annual Discover Teaneck included a documentary film, an international family fair, a yearbook, house tours, a film festival and gala. It was a combined effort of the Teaneck Housing Information Center (in the management role), Teaneck Public Schools, Township of Teaneck, private industry and hundreds of volunteers.

Run a major event on a shoestring budget with some seed money, self-supporting activities (ads in the yearbook, profits from the film festival), volunteers working with paid personnel, sponsors and in-kind services.

Reap the benefits! The schools are given the opportunity to broaden their base of support by reaching an untapped audience. Their image is enhanced as they showcase talent and accomplishments of staff and students. (There were student hosts and hostesses at the gala and entertainment was provided by student groups. The International Fair also featured student entertainment—jazz, dance and vocal groups—as well as displays and booths. A section of the yearbook was devoted to the schools, which were also featured in the short documentary film. Thousands of people saw the public schools in a positive way. There was more than reading, writing and arithmetic; the schools were observed as a source of cultural enrichment within the community.)

A major happening such as this fosters cooperation and partnerships among the various segments of the total community: public schools, township offices, business sector, realtors, religious groups, local universities, hospitals and local press.

Recognize that a once-a-year event doesn't take the place of ongoing cooperation between the public schools and a housing center or township agency.

REACH OUT...Tap the talents of residents, teachers and students who are willing to volunteer. Involvement is the key to the success of a major happening!

THE MEDIA: MONSTERS OR MARSHMALLOWS?

3

Though there are always exceptions to the rule, reporters generally are not as bad as most school officials make them out to be. Most reporters do not resemble the wild-eyed characters of *The Front Page*, they are just trying to do their jobs the same way board members and administrators do theirs. The reporter's job is to gather information and good reporters, like good administrators, will consistently do the best they can.

Sometimes the reporter is going to gather information that is not complimentary to the school district and the school board and professional staff is not going to like it. It is important to keep in mind that it is not the reporter's job to make the district look good; that's the job of the board's PR coordinator. Dealing with reporters does take a certain knack, as does dealing with people in general, but there are some techniques and procedures that can make the job a little easier.

The Value of the First-Name Basis

Getting to know the reporters and editors who cover the district is one of the best ways to ensure that you get your message across with consistent accuracy. If the reporters and editors of the local media understand you, if they know where you're coming from, if they feel they can trust you, chances are good that they will respect you and value the information you give them. But district communicators must always remember the two most important words when talking to reporters: DON'T LIE. You should never, under any circumstances, lie to a reporter. One lie and all credibility is lost forever. It's a high price to pay for one moment of convenience.

So get to know your reporters and editors as people—have lunch, make small talk before and after board meetings. In short, if you don't treat reporters as enemies you shouldn't have any battles. It will also help you to keep a steady flow of information, sure—some bad news will be printed but the good news will get its share of publicity as well. Being able to talk freely with media types will also be a blessing on those occasions when you have a gripe or complaint. You can make your feelings known and set the record straight with reasonable expectation that the error will be corrected or the story will be put into proper context.

Such a relationship will also ensure that the reporters will always be able to get the information they need, that someone will be there to answer

their questions. One of the most common causes of "inaccurate" or "slanted" news stories is sources being "unavailable for comment." Reporters are forever facing a deadline and can't wait to go through bureaucratic channels. If a district communicator wants to get some information to the news media, he or she should be available to give it.

Interviews

Whenever you talk to a reporter, assume that the conversation is "on the record." It is bad practice, and against the rules of the game, to say things you don't want printed and then say, "of course, that's off the record." Nothing is off the record. If you don't want a reporter to use something, don't say it.

Reporters will rarely agree to off the record interviews, they are too limiting. So always be up front with everything. If you don't feel you can talk about something, say so—but don't just say "no comment." Explain as completely as you can why you can't talk. Tell the reporter the truth, you don't have all the information or you simply don't know the answer to a question. The reporter will respect you more if you come clean from the beginning instead of just giving a gruff "no comment."

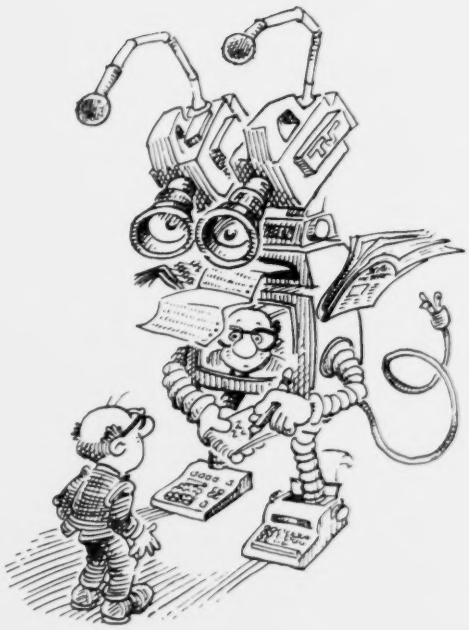
Types of Media

We've been lumping all reporters and editors into one giant mass called "The Media." In fact, there are a number of different types of media and each have their own special requirements and styles. Daily and weekly newspapers are the media that most often cover school districts. Newspapers are likely to consider the schools as one of their prime sources for news. That puts district communicators at an advantage, *you* have the product. But you've still got to sell that product and that means packaging it attractively and making it easy to get.

Daily newspapers have more deadlines than weeklies and their most important criteria for judging news stories is going to be timeliness—what's happening now. Don't give a daily newspaper information that is days or weeks old because they are not going to use it. Reporters will also be upset because they don't like to miss opportunities. Try to arrange for coverage or photo opportunities ahead of time. Whenever possible, if a student wins an award, let the papers know the day it's going to happen. They are more likely to use it as a feature if they get it on time. If a student is arrested, let the papers know the day that happens too. If you don't, you may be accused of covering something up and will be thought of as less than candid.

Weekly newspapers have more flexible deadlines and may be more feature-oriented. They may also have a smaller but, for the district communicator's purposes, a quality audience. Many weekly newspapers are bibles in the communities they serve. People tend to look to weeklies

almost exclusively for local news, including the schools. So the weeklies will be more receptive to the less timely "human interest" stories, mostly about kids. Stories about district officials get tiresome after awhile and, frankly, people are going to be more interested in the activities of their children or their neighbor's children than about what conference the superintendent attended this week.



By their very nature, weeklies have more room for local district stories than dailies. Most weeklies would rather run a local feature than an AP filler or even a release from NJSBA. Of course, weeklies, with small staffs, need more help than dailies. Photos and properly written news releases stand a better chance of getting into a weekly in toto than into a daily (more about that later). Again, a careful cultivation of the reporter and editor (who may actually be one and the same person) will open these doors for the district communicator.

Broadcasting

Naturally, the electronic media have different requirements than newspapers but that doesn't mean they should be ignored. The same rules about getting to know reporters and news directors apply, and those relationships will be your most valuable tools. However, both radio and TV are more immediate than even daily newspapers. A radio reporter is going to want a voice on tape and TV newspeople need good pictures.

Radio reporters can get what they need by telephone. The reporter will call, tell you what he or she needs and ask if you mind being taped. Then, just talk naturally, avoiding jargon and "educationese." You'll sound better if everyone can understand what you are talking about. Radio reporters at a board meeting will have portable tape recorders with them and will ask questions after the meeting just like the print people.

Many board members and administrators probably think of TV as the

"Crisis Medium," meaning the TV crew only shows up when there's a major problem in a school district. That's a reasonable assumption since by their very nature, TV news people will have to see either good pictures or a story of extreme importance before they will commit the personnel and expenses needed to produce a story for the nightly news. Most TV stations cover a larger area than the other media so there are many more "distractions." There are no special rules for talking to TV journalists—just act naturally, avoid jargon and above all, be honest and forthright at all times. However, if you are trying to interest a TV news director in a story about your district you will probably have to convince him or her of the visual impact of the piece. A TV reporter is not going to be happy just filming your superintendent or principals behind their desks. Yes, the reporter will do some of that but to get the story on the air it is going to have to have some good pictures. The best pictures, obviously are of schoolchildren doing something related to the story—performing in a play, role-playing in a classroom, conducting a physics experiment. Remember, the story is going to be competing for airtime with spectacular warehouse fires and dramatic courtroom scenes.

Using the Cablewaves

A more likely, though less widely viewed, television outlet for your district is cable TV. Cable programmers are less concerned with getting something immediately and are more open to the "local angle" since cable systems tend to serve fewer communities than their broadcast counterparts.

Most systems have local origination channels which live on school news and district affairs. The producers of these shows may be willing to feature district stories on a regular basis, the trick is to present your ideas attractively. Show the producer how the story is important to viewers in the community and even why viewers in neighboring towns might be interested. Try to develop and nurture the same kind of personal relationships with the cable powers that be as you do with the print journalists.

Many cable systems are also obliged to provide a public access channel to the communities in their coverage areas. These channels are open to anyone who wants to spend the time to put a show together and many school districts have taken advantage. The best shows feature schoolchildren as newscasters, interviewers, and talk show hosts. Many high quality shows also present district teachers hosting shows on cooking, automotive repair and other subjects. These shows are useful, interesting and have an almost professional sheen.

Again, the least imaginative shows are those featuring the district superintendent sitting with staff or administrators discussing school events or education issues. Try to avoid the reflexive tendency to put the superintendent and staff out front. The children are the most important part of the schools and they are what most people in the community are interested in. For more details on public access and local origination pro-

gramming, contact your local cable operator's public affairs director.

The (Limited) Power of the Press Release

Personal contact with reporters, editors, news directors and producers is the best way to let "the media" know what's happening in your school district. However, every district communicator should be reasonably well-versed in writing and distributing press releases. Written releases can be an effective way to get large amounts of information or lengthy features out to many different media outlets quickly. But they won't do a darn bit of good if they are illiterate or do not follow strict format rules. (See tip-sheet titled *Be a Better Writer*, p. 29)

First, decide what to write about. But when you do, keep in mind that editors and news directors are not likely to agree with you on what is important. News people use standard criteria, or news values, in deciding what to cover and it will help if what you send them meets those criteria.

There are five basic news values: timeliness, human interest, consequence (overall importance), important personality, and historic value. Your district superintendent or board president, despite their importance to your district, do not meet the personality requirement that heads of state, governors, and the US president do. An editor or news director is not going to be interested in what your district officials are doing unless it meets one of the other criteria. For example, your district superintendent attending a conference is not news. Your district superintendent volunteering to work with handicapped children at a local center may be news.

After deciding that what you've got to write about is worth a press release, that is, it meets one of the above criteria, put the important information right up front. Too many district releases start out like:

> The high school drama club is an organization that serves many school children. These children often perform in plays for the the community.
>
> One of these plays will take place on April 26 at 8 pm in the high school gym. The title of the play is 'The Diary of Anne Frank.' The performance is intended to coincide with nationwide rememberances of the Holocaust.

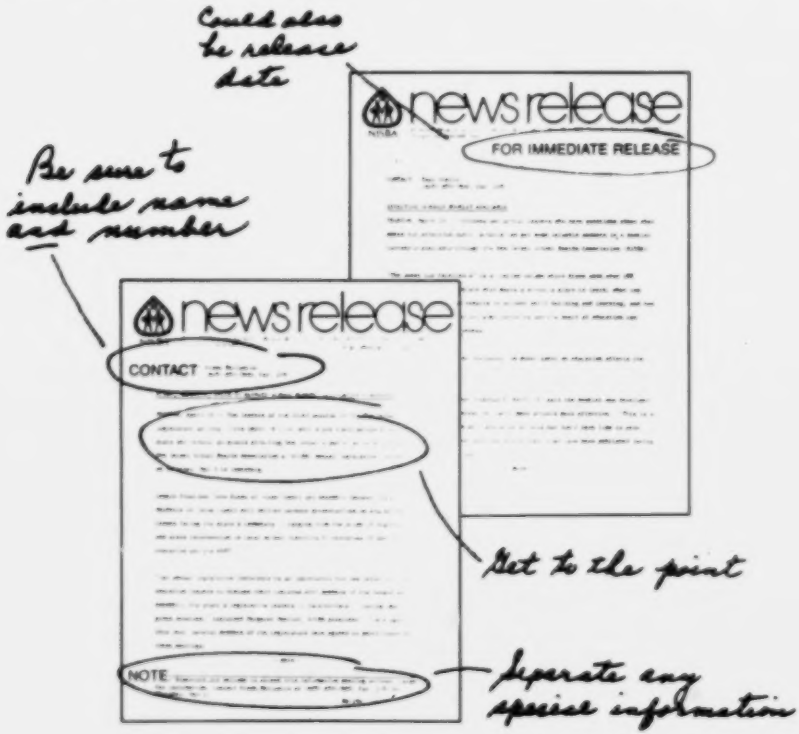
By the time editors get to the meat of the story they are likely to have lost interest. The first sentence, or lead, is the most important part of the release. It hooks readers into the story, telling them why they should continue to read. The lead should contain the gist of the story, not insignificant facts. The lead should be clear, crisp and concise—don't try to clutter too much information into one sentence, it's too hard to read. You don't have to put who, what, when, where, and why all into the first sentence. Pick out the most important or most interesting fact and put that up front, then develop the rest of the story.

In the previous example, a better lead would be:

As part of nationwide remembrance of the Holocaust this week, the high school drama club will present "The Diary of Anne Frank," one girl's account of life and death under the Nazis.

Now you could get into times, place and ticket information with reasonable assurance that an editor will be interested enough at least to read through the end. But only if the release is not too long. Try to keep the copy to one page, that's all anyone is going to read anyway. It's also another reason to put the important information up front—if it's buried, no one will see it.

After the release has been drafted, proofread carefully and edited critically with an eye to what news people will be interested in, put the whole thing into the proper format. The release should be printed on white paper with a distinctive logo across the top announcing where it is coming from. The following information should also be on the top of the page: when the information is to be released (almost always "immediately;" the name and telephone number of a person to contact with questions; a headline; and a dateline showing where and when the release was issued (see sample below).



Summary

It is very easy to sum up what a good media relations program includes: Personal relationships with reporters; honest, forthright and complete information; clear language, no jargon; NO LIES; and understanding reporters' and editors' priorities. There really is no secret way to get along with reporters. They are people trying to do a job and should be treated accordingly. Chances are they'll treat you the same way. (See tipsheet titled *Press Relations,* p. 31)

BE A BETTER WRITER

By
Claudia M. Cuddy
Newsletter Editor
East Greenwich Schools

School administrators and officials communicate through writing all the time. Clear, simple writing is a learned skill—and often quite a chore. You can "talk on paper" more easily by following some of these suggestions.

Know Your Audience. Their educational levels and occupations, beliefs and attitudes, group loyalties and norms and whether they are friendly, hostile or indifferent. Ask these questions—

- How much does my audience know?
- What might they want to know?
- What should they know?
- How can I present it to them in an interesting way?

Write For People. Personalize your message by using you, me, us, our whenever you can. Write to be understood—to express, not to impress. Write the way you talk, in plain, conversational language. Use contractions. By the way, it is also acceptable to use a preposition at the end of a sentence!

Avoid Jargon And Gobbledygook: Every profession has its specialized language. "Educationese" is confusing to people. Although many terms may be common to educators, noneducators are not familiar with them. Use other words if possible. If the term must be used, explain it. Just a few terms considered educational jargon include, resource room, integrated setting, cluster, needs assessment, nongraded and software/hardware.

Use Familiar Words. When a reader must struggle to understand the message, or if the reader needs a dictionary to decipher words, your words are obscuring the message. Use "help" for "assistance," "use" for "utilize," "try" for "endeavor," and so forth. Blank paper and a pencil in hand often make a person pompous and stuffy. Think "simple."

Use Concrete Terms. These are "picture nouns" and "action verbs." Abstract terms such as "learning aids" and "recreational equipment" can be stated in concrete terms—"films" and "parallel bars."

Omit Useless Words. Go on a which hunt. You can often take out "which" and make two sentences. "Which" can also be replaced by "that" in many cases.

Replace "be" or any of its forms (is, are, am, been, was, were) with a strong, active, descriptive verb.

Reduce groups of words to a minimum:

- it is the intent.....we hope
- in the very near future.....soon
- at this point in time.....now
- come in contact with.....meet
- in view of the fact that.....since
- are of the opinion.....believe

Good rule to remember: Simplify, eliminate.

continued

Check Sentence Structure. Use verbs early in the sentence to simplify the sentence. Omit all unnecessary adjectives and verbs. In a complex sentence, place main clause first when possible.

Apply Readability Formulas. One of these, the Gunning Fog Index, approximates the grade level at which a person must read to comprehend the material. To find the fog index:

1. Select a sample of 100 to 150 words, ending with a period. Divide the total number of words in the sample by the number of sentences. This will give the average sentence length of the sample.
2. Count the number of words in the sample containing three syllables or more. Do not count any capitalized words or three-syllable verb forms ending in -ed or -es.
3. Divide the total of long words by the number of words in the sample to get the percentage of long words. (If your answer is .12, you will use 12 in the next step.)
4. Add the average sentence length and the percentage of long words. Multiply this sum by 0.4. This gives you the reading level of the passage.

Recent studies report that the average American reads at the sixth grade level. Most readers feel more comfortable reading at one or two levels below their actual level.

Apply Readability Techniques.

1. Use many five letter words.
2. Keep sentences to an average length of 17 words. Vary sentences to avoid a monotonous rhythm, but keep "short" in mind.
3. Prefer simple sentences to compound or complex. Prefer active voice to passive.

Revise and Rewrite. Improvement is always possible. You can also have someone else read your work, since a fresh viewpoint is always helpful.

PRESS RELATIONS

Shirley M. Clement
Business Administrator/Board Secretary
Madison Public Schools

Tips:

Good press relations is crucial for any school district, and, though sometimes difficult, is possible to achieve. Key ingredients for successfully working with the press are initiative, honesty, cooperation and openess.

One person should be designated in the district as the primary contact with the press. Reporters work under the pressure of deadlines and often do not have the time to chase for answers through a variety of sources. One contact who can quickly get the facts and return the call to the paper is invaluable to the reporter and appreciated. The first and most important step for this person is to establish personal contact with the reporter(s) usually assigned to the district. If the reporter is not known, contact the editor. Explain your goal simply and honestly. You are asking for cooperation and an exchange of service: candid and complete information from you and comprehensive and accurate coverage of school news from them. Ask about deadlines, style sheets, story preferences, policies on photographs, etc. so that there can be cooperation. Editors and reporters are professionals, with their own responsibilities and pressures, and will appreciate being treated accordingly, and, most important for you, will cooperate.

Once contact is established, develop guidelines for following through:

- Send schedules of all meetings, both regular and special, to the reporter.
- Send meeting agendas and district newsletters to the reporters.
- Be available during the day, after meetings, and occasionally at night by telephone—reporters may need a specific fact while preparing a story at night.
- Hold briefing sessions on important topics.
- Alert reporters to any critical item on the agenda, particularly if you hope for extensive coverage on that item.
- Make sure stories submitted by the district are timely and newsworthy—past events are usually not "news" and activities such as field trips, concerts, plays, etc. are often not unique enough for a daily paper, though a weekly paper with a more folksy approach may run this type of story.
- Make sure stories submitted by the district are well-written, with good mechanics of writing and without educational jargon.
- Alert the paper in advance to any lengthy feature which the district will be submitting or which you hope the reporter will be interested in writing.
- Try not to mail the story to the paper, but rather to deliver it in person.

continued

- Get your story in on time, preferably early when the paper has more space flexibility.
- Be open and honest—credibility builds cooperation.

These guidelines require effort, time and commitment, but the benefits are real. Good press relations can result in not only positive stories about the schools on a regular basis but also cooperation from the press when a problem arises. Professional teamwork with the press allows you to effectively use a major avenue of public communications to tell your story!

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

4

Crisis...even the word sends chills down the spine of the most seasoned board member, administrator or school public relations person. Crises are situations that most of us would rather not think about; but like it or not, they do occur. Certainly we have all heard our colleagues' war stories, if we don't have a few of our own to tell. How did they survive? What brought them through critical situations? Is there some secret to dealing with crises successfully?

In a word—yes. And the best advice that any school official can heed is to plan now to deal with crises before they occur. If you don't, any incident, no matter how small could prove disastrous.

The best way to ensure that your crisis plan is adequate is to list all the possible crisis situations that could involve your district. For example, first list crises of natural origin: flood, tornado, earthquake, severe wind storms, icing conditions, and heavy snow. Then list those of human origin: vandalism, food poisoning in the cafeteria, bomb threats, student disturbances, employee strikes or walkouts, school closings, staff layoffs or firings or power or water shortages. Sudden catastrophes such as building collapse, bus wrecks or fatal accidents involving students in school should also be included in your crisis planning. Strive to develop a master plan that could handle any emergency, noting special needs or factors dealing with each situation.

Your master plan should contain answers to all of the following questions:

Are there key communicators on staff and in the community who will let you know about a potential crisis before it occurs?

Who, in each case, has decision-making authority? How can this person be located? In the absence of the prime decision-maker, who is next in authority?

What other local agencies should be notified—police, fire, health or municipal authorities? How can they be contacted?

What top administrators or board members should be contacted? Have you made a master list of names, addresses and phone numbers? If the phone lines are down, do you have an alternate method of contacting them?

Who is the district spokesperson? What lines of communications have

been set up between the central spokesperson and decision-makers to ensure that what gets out is correct?

Does the district have a network for gathering information and a central information collection point?

Are staff members aware of what to do when contacted by the media? (Remember, it is best to forward all media inquiries to the central spokesperson.)

Has a telephone network been set up to contact a large number of people in a short time?

If a student has been injured, has a system for notifying parents or guardians been set up?

Have the media been notified as soon as a crisis arises? (Don't play favorites. Have a list of names, addresses, phone numbers and deadlines of reporters on all papers in your area.)

Have district students' families, the media and the general public been given facts as they become available? (Information such as cause, immediate results, extent of loss and what measures the district has taken to restore order or alleviate the situation.)

Has your district taken steps to ensure students' and teachers' safety?

Have you made sure that staff and students are kept informed?

Don't Work In Isolation

Plans and procedures for each crisis situation should be developed in cooperation with community agencies, such as police and fire departments, ambulance services and public utilities. Periodic meetings should be held to review plans and revise them when necessary. To make sure you're really prepared for an emergency, participating agencies and the school district should occasionally hold "dry runs" of crisis plans similar to required fire drills in schools. These rehearsals will acquaint staff and support personnel with procedures you will use in a bona fide emergency. The rehearsal will also reveal any weaknesses in the master plan. Changes can then be made *before* a crisis occurs. Once the plan has been designed and approved (and certainly before there is an opportunity to implement it) citizens, parents, students and staff should be informed. They should also be made aware that school district officials will continually plan to prevent and avoid any major crises—but should the unthinkable occur, the district has taken definite steps to deal with it. (See tipsheet titled *Revised Recipe for Squelching Those Damn Rumors*,p. 37)

COMMUNICATION DURING STRIKES

The idea of a strike is, quite possibly, the most unpleasant thought any school communicator can have. A strike creates incredible pressure and will severely test your public relations program. If your program is firmly in place and your PR strategy is planned properly, well in advance, the program should pass the test with flying colors. A strike does not have to be a "public relations disaster" and many districts have weathered job actions with their public support and credibility intact.

There are two basic ideas that will carry your PR program through a strike. First, the program must have followed the rules of consistency and kept lines of communication open throughout the year. Second, you must carefully plan who is going to do what and when during the strike well before the picket lines go up. You cannot hope to establish proper communications with the media and the public during a strike, those lines must be in place. If you do have solid working relationships with reporters, editors and community leaders you will be able to get your message out accurately and quickly. In addition, everyone on the board and in the administration must be intimately familiar with the plan and must know what their roles are.

It is impossible to say exactly what every board should do in every situation. Conditions are different in every strike and there can be no list of specific suggestions about strategies and tactics. The best we can do here is set out a list of general ideas. If you have any questions about specific actions or reactions during a work stoppage, consult someone familiar with your district and the situation.

Single Spokesperson

It is imperative that the board appoint a single spokesperson to handle all media inquiries during the strike. Furthermore, every board member

must be instructed to direct all questions and requests for comments to the appointed spokesperson. It should be understood by the board and by the media that only one person speaks for the board.

Some school districts have found that holding daily news conferences is a good way to get their messages out accurately and completely. However, a news conference will only work if you have an effective spokesperson—one who can think fast and stick to the board's plan. If your spokesperson gets flustered by difficult questions or by hounding reporters the news conference will turn into a liability. In any event, the board should issue news releases every morning and afternoon, whether or not there has been any significant action. You've got to stay in front of the reporters' eyes or they'll stop looking to you for information. You should always go to the press quickly with relevant information, right from the moment a strike is imminent. If you've carefully cultivated your media contacts and kept open your lines of communication you can be fairly sure that you'll get a good hearing from reporters and editors. You'll quite literally have turned the local press into your forum.

Along those same lines, you should make it easy for the reporters to cover your side. Have ready press kits with basic information and vital statistics about the district, general board policies, and photos of important district officials. The less background work the reporters have to do the more time they can spend balancing the story and getting the important details right. You should also make arrangements for reporters to stay close to the story by providing a press room with telephones, typewriters, coffee and current information.

The union may call in experts from out of town to conduct their public relations campaign, an action that boards should not mimic. In fact, by keeping your efforts local you may be able take some PR advantage from the union bringing in "out-of-towners."

The Community

Reporters are not going to be the only people with questions. Parents will need information just as much as the media. In your pre-strike planning you should make provisions to keep parents up to date on the situation. If you are going to keep the schools open, parents will have to be told and they will have to be assured that the buildings will be safe. Direct mailings to parents, taking ads in local newspapers, and establishing a "hot line" for parents are all good ways to make sure that people in the community know what is going on at all times.

Here again, the value of an ongoing communications program can be seen clearly. If you have established strong lines of communication with community leaders and parent and civic groups, your job will be much easier. There will be little chance for misinformation to get out and you will know that a lot of people are getting good information from sources they trust.

REVISED RECIPE FOR SQUELCHING THOSE DAMN RUMORS

By
David J. Panner
Executive Director
Kingsway Learning Center

"Everybody says it, and what everybody says must be true."

—James Fenimore Cooper

Definition of a Rumor:

Unsubstantiated information with an uncertain origin about any topic. Typically spread by word of mouth, over the phone or by the media.

Characteristics of Rumors:

- There is never clear evidence of the truth.
- They revolve around an issue or object.
- They are a communication process as well as a product.
- They are easily started and disseminated and may be difficult to stop.
- They increase with lack of facts.
- People are more apt to believe rumors they have heard before.
- Rumors frequently originate from stressed employees.

Effects Rumors Have on Your School District:

Small rumors precipitate large crises.

- Administrators have lost jobs because of rumors.
- Bond issues can be lost.
- Budgets can be defeated.
- Confidence of the community can be lost.
- Rumors can destroy staff morale.

Internal Procedures for Squelching Rumors:

Conduct frequent open door hours or rap sessions for all staff.

- Establish a key communicator system.
- Permit staff to participate in district committee work.
- Always provide staff with latest information and facts concerning administrative decisions.
- When a controversial issue arises within your community make sure your staff is fully informed since many do not live in the same community where they work.
- The day after each meeting of the Board of Education, provide staff with a summary of the board meeting.

continued

Revised Recipe for Squelching Those Damn Rumors:

Combine three parts common sense:

- Be alert, visible and available
- Develop two-way communications
- Talk and listen *with* people, don't wait for rumor damage

Blend with:

- Weekly open door hour for staff, students and community
- Key Communicator system for staff and/or students and community
- Internal techniques listed above

Add:

- Use of existing grapevines
- Time for feedback via advisory groups and luncheons

Optional seasoning:

- Rumor control phone

Mix:

- Slowly—all good things take time—with frank answers and open communications

5 BOND AND BUDGET REFERENDA

For some school districts defeated bond and budget elections are a way of life. Yet other districts have no trouble at all passing referenda. What makes the difference? Why are some districts so successful while others meet with one failure after another?

Experts offer many reasons. However, the bond and budget campaign itself has been mentioned as one of the most significant reasons why elections succeed or fail. With that in mind, let's go over the elements that are most essential to a successful campaign.

- Base your strategy on accurate data. Design your campaign around valid information including the district's *real* needs, unique characteristics, and the kinds of voting publics within the district.
- Deal with educational issues and grievances against the schools before the start of the election campaign even if it means deferring the election. Give special attention to the individuals and groups who would most likely raise crucial questions.
- Plan your strategy to provide honest, complete and relevant information to the entire school community. Strategy should be designed not only to disseminate information but to influence and persuade voters. Deal with beliefs and value systems as well as with citizen perceptions of the purpose of the schools. For example, smaller communities may see the schools as a means of reinforcing the dominant values of their own society. Community members will not hesitate to personally voice their opinions to teachers, administrators and school board members. On the other hand, larger, more urban communities may view the schools as simply providing necessary services and will respond to information coming from the media that builds a sound rationale for an expansion of these services. Everyone involved in the district's campaign should understand these factors and account for them in planning.

When planning your campaign, it's a good idea to go over the histories of previous campaigns. Review ideas that worked or suggestions that didn't quite pan out. All too often, because of administrative and board turnover, everyone forgets what was successful and what was not. Taking a good look at the past can save valuable time and effort. (See tipsheet titled *The Nuts and Bolts of Passing School Budgets*, p. 46)

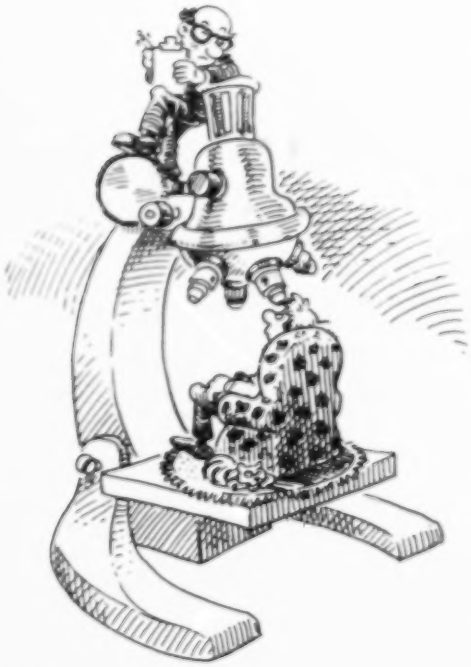
PRE-CAMPAIGN PLANNING

Identify District Needs

One of the best ways to identify the real needs of your district is to establish advisory committees. Teachers, students, community members—all should be considered when forming the committee. One of the best ways to choose committee members is to invite various groups and service organizations to designate a delegate and alternate. This action will preclude any suggestions that may arise that your district is "loading" the committee in its favor.

Once the committee members have the feeling that they are considered integral parts of the campaign effort, they will let you know (all too quickly) how they feel about current needs and services of the district. These same groups, if they are truly representative, will also serve as sounding boards and will provide a constant source of information about what the community as a whole thinks about its schools.

Opinion polling is another way to find out how a bond and/or budget issue is going over...or not going over if that's the case. Keep in mind, however, that some form of polling should be conducted regularly in every school district. It's a good way to establish your "communications credibility." Be sure to include plans for tabulating, reporting and acting upon results. Half-way through your finance campaign take another survey. This will help you readjust your campaign to answer questions people are asking at various stages.



About using consultants-whether or not you should enlist the services of a consultant will depend primarily upon the amount of local expertise available.

Determine Voter Characteristics

Every community is unique and the differences are reflected in its feelings about the schools. School district personnel must

learn how to interpret the abundance of demographic data that describes their own communities. They will find that factors such as age of residents, family size, level of education, occupational mobility and religious and political affiliation create a number of cohesive voting groups.

In this instance especially, consultants can help district personnel identify and type these groups and prepare strategies that will counter or reinforce their anticipated responses.

Determine School District Characteristics

Each district has a number of unique structural and/or organizational characteristics that determine the kinds of campaign strategies best suited to them. District size, educational expectations of parents, recent district consolidation, assessed valuation per pupil, the annual tax levy and the vulnerability of the present school leaders should be some of the factors of special concern when preparing for the issues that may be raised during the campaign. In other words, it is important that administrators and board members recognize the limitations the district imposes upon itself.

Determine Crucial Issues Related to the Bond Proposal

Cohesive voting patterns can be the product of tradition, circumstance or of issues arising from the proposal itself. The problem is not so much to identify them but rather to put them in their proper perspective. Many questions that come up during the campaign may be remnants of old battles already won while others may be fresh concerns and potentially far more dangerous. Local experts, or consultants can be especially valuable in helping district personnel to analyze these issues and to advise them about developing reactive strategies. Anticipation and reaction must form the framework for analyzing and dealing with campaign issues that arise.

After considering each of the foregoing steps, you are now ready to develop an appropriate campaign strategy based on the needs, population characteristics and issues of special concerns. Once the staff implements the basic campaign plan, make certain that necessary adjustments are made in strategies and techniques as you move toward election day.

And what about election day? Hopefully, your campaign will be successful and your work is finished, right? Wrong! After things have settled down a bit, be sure to keep a complete analysis of the results in writing. Keep a record of all election material including news releases, flyers, bulletins and news clippings. Organize and store the material just in case you have to use it all again. Also be sure to thank all of your volunteers, preferably with a personal note.

Summary

Campaigns, like school district needs and services, vary. The sugges-

tions listed above are just that—suggestions. Perhaps you may find some—or all—of them helpful. Choose those that may be most useful and tailor them to your own district's needs.

Overall, however, these proposals reinforce your Association's belief that successful school bond campaigns evolve from a proper, well-executed plan and thoughtful consideration of various available strategies.

An increasingly informed public will expect its school administrators and local school board members to be as competent in developing a coherent statement of needs as they are in the design and financing of new facilities and programs. They should not be expected to settle for less.

DON'T HOLD "BORED" MEETINGS

Board Meetings are Public Business

Remember that the public has a right to be present at your board meetings. The law requires that all official board business be conducted in public; good sense dictates that the public be made to feel both welcome and comfortable at your meetings.

Publicize the date, time and place of your meeting well in advance, using all available media. Go beyond the required legal notices. Announce the principal items to be considered. Emphasize that the public is invited, even urged, to attend. Don't give anyone the opportunity to charge that your board operates in secret.

Generally, it is felt that executive sessions should be avoided if at all possible. They tend to destroy the board's credibility and to provoke suspicion and mistrust. Such sessions must be reserved for discussion of problems involving personnel, discipline, salary negotiations, land acquisition, legal matters, etc. If you must have a closed session at a board meeting, schedule it for the end. Never keep the public waiting while you huddle in private.

A few words of greeting by the board president can

get the meeting off to a good start. Distribute copies of the agenda to everyone present. A booklet explaining the parliamentary procedures to be followed, giving the names of school officials and perhaps discussing how educators and the community can work together for the betterment of the schools, is a good idea. Identify board members by introducing them, as well as by using name placards. Use microphones to be sure that board proceedings are heard by everyone. Provide comfortable seating— don't ask adults to sit in chairs designed for children. Ask all speakers to identify themselves by name, address, the groups they represent, etc. As a courtesy to the press, the public and to all in attendance, start your meetings on time.

Strive to make your board meeting interesting. Always include discussion items concerning educational issues. Invite students, teachers and staff to present new ideas to the board. Students can talk about new school programs, teachers can explain a course of study, non-instructional staff can show slides, discuss the school transportation system, new cafeteria facilities, etc.

Try, insofar as is possible, to avoid loading your board meetings with trivia. Discuss the most important topics early; don't wait until late in the evening when everyone is numb from hours of listening to routine business, to bring up major issues.

To avoid charges of bias, air both sides of controversial or disputed issues—even though the board votes unanimously on them. Give citizens an opportunity to address the board, but don't get involved in arguments with them.

Make sure that board members "carry the ball" at the meeting, instead of acting like part of the audience. It is the board which is responsible for policy decisions and answerable to the public for them. When the superintendent does most of the talking, the public may decide that board members are simply rubber stamps for the professional administrator.

Don't construe low attendance at meetings as a sign that the public is satisfied with what you're doing. It may also indicate community indifference or apathy which will eventually resurface to the disadvantage of the school district.

As discussed before, after the board meeting prepare a summary of the proceedings for distribution to staff and students. If the press or public asks for minutes, you have an obligation to supply them. You need not—although you may if you wish—release working papers, preliminary figures, rough drafts, etc.

The Board Meeting's Place in the PR Program

The board meeting can serve as an important medium for furthering good relationships with the community or it can destroy whatever rapport may have been built with the public.

School communications experts suggest that several times a year the

board meeting can serve as a "public court of educational relations" at which board members explain goals, make proposals, question the public about their attitudes and feelings, explain educational issues and listen sympathetically.

Teachers should be included at these special board meetings, not as employees, but as educators...offering their views, asking questions, letting their hair down and providing insight about their expectations. Students should also be invited to attend. But be prepared! They may come at first with shouts and demands—but later with their opinions, their questions and their needs. And out of all this will come their reasons, proposals and suggestions. Many school districts already hold such forums with considerable success.

The Reporter At Your Board Meeting

Just as the public has a right to be at your board meeting, so do reporters. Don't treat them like intruders. Give them the necessary facilities to do their work—a comfortable chair, a table at the front of the room, pencils, paper, a glass of water, a cup of coffee, etc. Provide reporters with a complete agenda plus copies of relevant background materials, except, of course, those of a confidential nature.

Assign someone to serve as liaison to members of the press to fill them in on names, background details, to attend to their needs before and during the meeting. After the meeting, it may be wise to hold a special session with reporters to clear up possible misunderstandings and answer questions. Ask the people assigned as liaisons to make their home and office telephone numbers available should the reporter need additional information later on. Alert the media when something "hot" is scheduled for discussion. If a reporter can't make a meeting, send him an explanation of agenda items, copies of important resolutions and reports and a summary of important action taken.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are of particular value for airing highly controversial

issues. A disadvantage of such hearings is that they tend, unless firmly directed by an able chairman, to get out of control. Also, if the presentations support one conclusion, and the board takes another direction, the board may be accused of ignoring the public's wishes. The board's position should be presented by competent people not officially connected with the board who can avoid being drawn into argument or into discussion of personalities.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF PASSING SCHOOL BUDGETS

By
Fred Rosenzweig
Assistant Superintendent
Morris Hills Regional District

Establish Program Components

1. Special budget issue newsletter
2. Slide-cassette program
3. Video-cassette program
4. Pre-budget hearings
5. Public budget hearing
6. Staff mini-meetings
7. Question and answer lists
8. Highlights of budget—new items, new equipment, new projects, new programs
9. Cablevision programming
10. Overhead transparencies
11. Meetings with municipalities
12. Meetings with students
13. Meetings with community groups
14. Meetings with school booster organizations
15. Personal letters to resident staff members

Establish Budget Publicity Calendar

1. One-minute narratives for each budget category
2. Budget issue newsletter articles assigned and written
3. 35 mm slide photography and processing
4. 30-minute script-slide sequencing
5. Newsletter layout, typeset, printed, processed for mailing
6. Final script narrated and taped
7. Multi-media program previewed by administrative team
8. Newsletter mailed
9. Final multi-media program reviewed by board of education
10. Program presented at public hearing
11. Schedule prepared for budget presentations to staff, students, boosters, community and municipalities
12. Slide program duplicated onto video-cassette
13. Arrangements made with local cablevision station to telecast budget program
14. Program presented to all interested groups
15. Budget election

continued

General Tips for Multi-media Budget Program

1. Plan for not more than 280 slides (two 140-slide trays)
2. Assign photography arrangements for building principals
3. Request at least six slides for each budget program
4. Assign a coordinator—one person to direct the project, including research, statistics, script writing, photography, sound
5. Each slide should be marked with budget category, location and person submitting
6. Each group of slides (by budget category) to be submitted in 6x 9 manila envelope
7. A team of technical advisors should work with program
8. Select two narrators (male and female) from school staff
9. Use services of district's media specialist to assist in the recording
10. Number each script draft revision and specify pulse marks for slide synchronization
11. Avoid budget statistics in slide program
12. Include musical background, preferably from recordings of high school band
13. Allow for musical interlude intermission if using two slide trays and one projector
14. Use combination of local and commercial slides
15. Budget funds for your multi-media budget presentations

CHECK-UP

	Yes	No
1. Our school district's public relations policy statement is written *in clear, concise, understandable language.*	☐	☐
2. This policy statement has been approved by our board, is published in our policy manual and has been reviewed in the past 12 months.	☐	☐
3. The policy statement clearly provides for the delegation of responsibility and authority for implementing the public relations program to a specific member of the administrative staff.	☐	☐
4. Our board of education clearly recognizes that public relations is a management function and responsibility.	☐	☐
5. We have specifically identified reasonable and realistic resources, both human and material, for conducting the public relations function in our district.	☐	☐
6. The public relations program has a clear program budget that reflects all major public relations activities of the district.	☐	☐
7. The individual who is assigned the responsibility for handling our school district's public relations program has been provided with or was hired with a basic knowledge of the communications processes and tools.	☐	☐
8. The individual responsible for our public relations program is directly responsible to the chief executive of the district and serves as a key participant and member of the district's administrative team.	☐	☐
9. Our board regularly seeks the counsel of our public relations person, directly or through the superintendent, as it shapes new policy, examines major problems or implements programs.	☐	☐
10. Our public relations unit provides assistance to the building principal in the processes and procedures for developing and maintaining a strong public relations program at the building level.	☐	☐
11. Our public relations unit has a detailed crisis plan dealing with communications during times of difficulty as they happen.	☐	☐
12. Our school system has a regular newsletter written for and given to every member of the school staff, professional and nonprofessional.	☐	☐
13. Our school system has good news media relations.	☐	☐
14. Our board meetings are regularly covered by representative(s) of the news media.	☐	☐
15. Our individual school buildings have regular newsletters that are distributed to the parents of children attending the school.	☐	☐

16. Our school system maintains a basic information research program that keeps current data on population trends, public opinion, staffing, innovations, legislation, finance, curriculum, construction, staff-district relationships and other major areas of concern to the local district. ☐ ☐

17. We treat all such factual information as public information and give the public relations officer for our district total access to it. (This does not include confidential personnel or student record information.) ☐ ☐

18. Our school district solicits formal and informal feedback on its programs and activities, its products and purposes and its policies through surveys, suggestion boxes, personal contacts, advisory committees, etc. ☐ ☐

19. Our total public relations effort is regularly evaluated as to its effectiveness. ☐ ☐

20. All of our employees have been provided with training and/or are effectively carrying out their personal role in helping with the district's public relations program. ☐ ☐

Your PRQ (Public Relations Quotient) = Number Yes x 5: _____

Based on "Evaluation Instrument for Educational Public Relations", National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS INVENTORY

There are no "correct" or "incorrect" answers. The purpose of this inventory is to assist you in making a comprehensive review of the communications program of your school. Keep this inventory for future reference to assist you in periodic checks of your program.

Media

1. Is there a specific staff member assigned to act as a news-gatherer and to pass this information along to news media and the PTA-PTO newsletter chairman?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

2. If there is such a person, how often do you meet with him/her?

   Daily ☐ Several times a week ☐ Once a week ☐
   Less than once a week ☐

3. Do you issue a school-to-home newsletter?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   If yes, how often? Once a week ☐ At least once a month ☐
   Other _____

4. Does your school also issue a PTA-PTO newsletter?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   If yes, how often? Once a week ☐ Once a month ☐
   Other _____

5. Do you inform news media (newspapers, TV) about significant news at your school?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   If yes, how many news releases do you issue each semester?
   One or more a week ☐ One to five a month ☐ Other ☐

Parents

1. How many of the following practices are followed in your school?

   (a) Occasional "continental" breakfasts for parents with the superintendent ☐
   (b) positive notes sent home on a regular basis by teachers ☐
   (c) positive phone calls made to parents by teachers ☐
   (d) random home visits made by teachers ☐
   (e) random home visits made by principal ☐
   (f) special parents' night where classes are held in evening ☐

2. Have you ever sent a questionnaire to parents asking them what they like and don't like about the school?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Is a true cross section of parental attitudes represented on your school advisory committee (or are there only the "yes" people on it)?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

4. Do you have a student advisory committee, or are students represented on your school advisory committee?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Do you keep your parents up to date on the problems in your school such as lack of space, discipline, drug use, vandalism as well as the accomplishments of the school?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Do you return phone calls from parents the same day you receive them?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Do you fully explain in notes to parents the educational value of student field trips and inservice or shortened school days? Or do you just send a note home stating there will be a field trip or there will be a shortened school day?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

Staff

1. Do you hold meetings of all your professional staff members?

   At least once a month ☐ Several times a year ☐ Never ☐

2. Do you make your support staff feel like they are part of the school team by inviting them to staff meetings and keeping them up on the school operation?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Do you regularly set aside time at your staff meetings to specifically discuss community relations-public relations topics?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

4. Are you readily accessible to your staff?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Are you readily accessible to your students?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

The School and Community Relations
Leslie W. Kindred, Don Bagin and Donald R. Gallagher
1976. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ

School Communications Ideas That Work
Don Bagin, Frank Garzian and Charles H. Harrison
1972. Communicaid Inc., Woodstown, NJ

Building Public Confidence in Your Schools
National School Public Relations Association, 1978

The Art of Readable Writing
Rudolph Flesch 1966. Harper and Row

The New Jersey School Boards Association
Communications Department
413 West State Street, P.O. Box 909
Trenton, NJ 08605-0909

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)
1801 North Moore Street
Arlington VA 22209

Special thanks to some of New Jersey's outstanding school communicators who provided tipsheets for this publication.

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